

Teacher Initiated Research: Action Research

By Zeynep Onel

Evaluation of Instruction within Curriculum Evaluation

Evaluation of any curriculum or program is both inevitable and essential for the well-being and improvement of the program. Instruction is one of several components of the curriculum that need evaluation. Instruction and implementation of the curriculum must be evaluated so that teachers and other decision makers may make the best choices of instructional objectives, modes, and content, teaching methods, and methods for evaluating outcomes.

Evaluation of instruction will not only help to improve the curriculum but also contribute to teacher development, i.e., it helps teachers improve their teaching. Although there are various means of gathering information about the actual teaching that takes place, the research carried out by the teachers themselves is the most practical since it allows teachers to be involved in their own development. This kind of research called "Action Research," is also known as "teacher initiated classroom investigation" (Gregory in Richards 1994; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988).

Action Research

Action research in the language classroom is a tool for teacher and curriculum development. It aims to "increase the teacher's understanding of classroom teaching and learning" (Gregory in Richards 1994; Kemmis and McTaggart 1982). As both the presenter and the audience, the teachers become receptive to the results of such research (Beasley and Riordan 1981). In other words, theory and practice come together in such a study.

What is action research?

Action research can be defined as a combination of the terms "action" and "research." Action research puts ideas into practice for the purpose of self-improvement and increasing knowledge about curriculum, teaching, and learning. The ultimate result is improvement in what happens in the classroom and school (Kemmis and McTaggart 1982).

What is the aim?

The main aim of action research is to bring about change (Richards in Brenner 1993). It is situational or content-based, collaborative, participatory, and self-evaluative (Cohen and Manion 1980). It is "problem focused," mainly "concerned with a single case in a specific situation," and tries to find solutions to the problem in focus. It not only encourages teachers to compare methods and ideas with a critical eye, and to adopt these ideas into their teaching environment

(Nunan 1988), but engages them in their teaching in a deeper way (Richards in Brenner 1993). In this way teacher's awareness of theory is also raised (Ramani 1987).

Who and by what means?

Since the main aim of action research is to improve instruction, it is preferable that classroom teachers be directly involved in this process. With the growing interest in the learner and learning process, teachers have become more interested in practical solutions to problems. They have discovered that action research is best done by the practitioners, namely teachers themselves (Nunan 1988).

There are different ways of collecting data about instruction. Teachers can video or audio tape their lessons and transcribe afterwards. They can also keep journals or detailed diaries for each one of the students and for what they have been doing, and keep track of what has been done in the classroom. Carrying out observations and administering surveys and questionnaires are other possible means of collecting data about the teaching learning process.

Audio/video taping gives one the opportunity to record every single detail. Since it is hardly possible to take note of everything happening in class, using audio/video tapes will enable one to observe many things at one time. Transcribing the data might seem time consuming at the beginning; however, this load can be reduced if a colleague is asked to help.

Keeping journals not only helps the instructor observe student performance continuously, but gives the opportunity to question one's own teaching. One can write down one's feelings, reflections, plans, and observations. It is important that teachers write in their journal regularly.

It is also possible to keep what is called a "dialog journal" together with the students. Students can write their feelings, reflections, and thoughts in their journals, and they can share them with their teachers through their journals. This way there is a dialog between teachers and students through which teachers can learn about their students' learning experiences. Teachers can even use dialog journals to evaluate students' writing, both in terms of content and structure. A dialog between the researcher and the object of the research (teacher and learner) can create new possibilities for the learning, growth, and transformation of everything in the class.

Teachers might also have a colleague or an expert observe their classes. If the observee does not feel self-conscious, such collaborative research helps in the final stage when it is time to make the results public to the relevant people. In this case, observation sheets and record forms of several kinds might be useful since they will enable the observer to follow the lesson easily, and in the same manner help the observee visualize the record in a systematic way (Nunan 1988).

Surveys and questionnaires are effective ways of gathering information about affective aspects, such as beliefs, attitudes, motivation, and preferences.

How to prepare teachers?

Teachers should be trained in ways to collect and interpret data in the classroom. Examples of such preparation would be successive workshops with teachers during which they watch previously videotaped lessons and fill in the standard forms or handouts in groups, or

individually, and then analyze data (Ramani 1987). Teachers will need to gain skills in judging the impact of curriculum proposals in practice and in evaluating practice and performance (Walker 1985).

Teachers also need to be competent in monitoring and describing their own and their students' activities and behaviors. They should also have an understanding of instructional methods and materials as well as their applications. Finally, it is necessary for teachers to be able to change their behaviors on the basis of the classroom settings (Hook 1981).

Procedures for Conducting Action Research

Initial reflection

The key to action research is having a theme to concentrate on. It can be a general concern, a perceived need, or a problem with a particular class. For example:

1. Students never seem interested in the topics I choose for conversation classes.
2. Students do not seem to make use of revision strategies I have presented.

The next step is to make these concerns more tangible so that they can be changed or improved more easily. Examples of specific questions on the previously stated concerns would be:

1. How can topic choice be negotiated in the classroom?
2. Which teaching techniques would prepare students better for using revision strategies in writing?

To be able to report any change, teachers need a record, which will enable them to compare before and after. What specific variables are of concern, what is the current situation?

Planning

After the problem is identified, it is time to develop a plan of action to improve on the present situation. There is a need for a detailed plan informing who is going to do what, when it has to be completed, what the modifications to the curriculum are, how the revised teaching strategies will be implemented, etc. At this stage information gathering instruments should be prepared.

Action

The plan will be implemented at this stage. However, it is unlikely that one will be able to follow the plan step-by-step. Therefore, in the light of experience and feedback, some deviations from the plan might be necessary, provided that these deviations and the reasons for them are recorded.

Observation

This is where the effects of action are observed and documented in the contexts in which they occur. As mentioned earlier, keeping diaries or journals will help prepare teachers for this stage. These records will be useful in reporting the findings to others afterwards.

Reflection

The effects that were recorded during the observations are evaluated to be used later for further planning, subsequent action and so on. The result will most probably lead to a further cycle of research in order to answer questions such as, "What are the barriers to change?" and "How can the changes be improved?"

The process outlined above will lead teachers to further professional development-a lifelong process.

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